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OLYMPIODORUS OF THEBES AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IMPERIAL POLITICS IN RAVENNA IN 421

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OLYMPIODORUS OF THEBES AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IMPERIAL POLITICS IN RAVENNA IN 421

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Abstract

In *Fragmentum* 36, the ninth-century Photius, patriarch of Constantinople, summarises Olympiodorus of Thebes teratological story about Libanius the magician and the contradictory responses to his presence in Ravenna by Constantius III and his wife, Galla Placidia. The story of the dispute between the couple and of Galla Placidia's success in having Libanius put to death is to be believed, in the light of what else we can reconstruct about how this married couple operated in other situations. Although R.C. Blockley assessed this story in terms of Olympiodorus' interest in paganism and magic, it will be argued here that it is best seen in terms of the poet-historian's hostility to Constantius—something Blockley noted but did not explain. That hostility is to be understood as flowing from Olympiodorus' aim of providing an encomium for Theodosius II in Constantinople, who was ill-disposed towards Constantius, parallel as it were with the efforts of Claudian for Stilicho, detailed a generation ago by Alan Cameron.

Introduction

Fragmentum 36 of Olympiodorus concerns an incident that we must date to 421, when Honorius and Constantius III were joint emperors in the West between February and September, if we accept the accuracy of Olympiodorus' account:

> He tells a marvellous story about a certain Libanius, an Asian by race, who came to Ravenna during the reign of Honorius and Constantius. According to the historian, he was a consummate magician, able to achieve results even against barbarians without resort to weapons, and this he promised to do. He was given permission to make the attempt, but when his promise and his high repute came to the ears of the Empress Placidia, the magician was put to death. For Placidia threatened Constantius that she would break up their marriage if Libanius, a wizard and an unbeliever, remained amongst the living.[1]

[1] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 36 (Blockley, 1983, 200): Ὅτι Λιβάνιόν τὸ τερατολογεῖ. Ἀσιανὸν τὸ γένος, κατὰ τὴν βασιλείαν Ὁνωρίου καὶ Κωνσταντίου ἐπὶ Ῥάβενναν παραγενέσθαι. ἄκρον δὲ τοῦτον εἶναι τελεστικόν. καὶ δύνασθαι δέ, φησί, καὶ ὑπισχνεῖσθαι αὐτὸν χωρὶς ὁπλιτῶν καὶ κατὰ βαρβάρων ἐνεργεῖν. εἶτα πεῖραν δούς, φησίν, οὗτος τῆς ὑποσχέσεως καὶ τῆς φήμης δραμούσης ὥστε καὶ Πλακιδίαν τὴν βασιλίδα μαθεῖν, ἀναιρεῖται ὁ τελεστής·ἠπείλει γάρ, φησίν, ἡ Πλακιδία Κωνσταντίῳ χωρισμὸν τοῦ γάμου εἰ τοῖς ζῶσι Λιβάνιος περιλείποιτο, ἀνὴρ γόνης καὶ ἄπιστος. English translation in Blockley. On Olympiodorus see

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There are two conflict stories here: one is between Galla Placidia and Libanius the magician, and the other is between Galla Placidia and her husband, Constantius.[2] The importance of this seemingly inconsequential account is not only that it tells us something about Christian intolerance of magic religion in late antiquity (or, more accurately, the variation in Christian tolerance of magic), but, more importantly, it informs us of the dynamics of power in the imperial court in Ravenna and of the position and influence of Galla Placidia.

Just as importantly, it helps us uncover the perspectives and objectives of Olympiodorus as an author. When Blockley commented upon this passage it was in the context of demonstrating Olympiodorus' interest and belief in magic and how only pagan magic had preserved or restored the empire from the disasters that had befallen it.[3] We can go further than that. The argument advanced here is that just as Claudian did for Stilicho,[4] Olympiodorus was doing for Theodosius II, and that the enemies of the eastern emperor, of whom Constantius was counted as one, needed to be denigrated.[5] On the other hand, Galla Placidia's independent streak could be reimagined by Olympiodorus as an indication of her harmony with Theodosius. This account concerning Libanius the magician helped Olympiodorus achieve that goal, by showing the lack of harmony between the western imperial couple, aligning Galla Placidia with her nephew Theodosius' politics.

This paper begins by looking at the ostensible topic of the incident: early Christian attitudes towards magic in late antiquity, before turning to probe the deeper issues of the relationship between Galla Placidia and Constantius, and then Olympiodorus' purpose in composing his history.

Magic in Late Antique Christianity

From the time of Constantine I onwards we find a series of laws preserved in *Codex Theodosianus* condemning fortune-tellers (*haruspices*), astrologers (*mathematici*), seers (*uates*), diviners (*harioli*), sorcerers (*magi*), conjurers (*immissores*), and magicians in general (*malefici*).[6] While some activity that was designed to promote personal health or avert natural disaster could be tolerated, as we see in a law from early in Constantine's reign, since it caused no harm, anything that endangered people's safety or enflamed their lust was decried,[7] although even such leniency would disappear when capital punishment and deportation was introduced by the middle of the fourth century for consulting fortune-tellers and astrologers.[8] Those who summoned the spirits of the dead did so in order to torment the living.[9] They were the enemies of the human race (*humani generis inimici*, a

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PLRE 2.798–9 (Olympiodorus 1). On Honorius see *PLRE* 1.442 (Honorius 3). On Constantius see *PLRE* 2.321–5 (Constantius 17); and *PCBE* 2.475–6 (Constantius 12).

[2] On Galla Placidia see *PLRE* 2.888–9 (Placidia 4); and *PCBE* 2.1803–6 (Placidia 1).

[3] Blockley, 1981, 39–40. See also Treadgold, 2004, 732.

[4] On Stilicho see *PLRE* 1.853–8; *PCBE* 2.2133–5; and Hughes, 2010.

[5] On Theodosius II see *PLRE* 2.1100 (Theodosius 6).

[6] On Constantine see *PLRE* 1.223–4 (Constantinus 4).

[7] *Cod.Theod.* 9.16.3 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 460).

[8] *Cod. Theod.* 9.16.4-12 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 461–3); and 9.40.1 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 500–1).

[9] *Cod. Theod.* 9.16.5 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 461).

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phrase reminiscent of Tacitus' comments on the first Christians in Rome). While many criminals could be pardoned at Easter, murderers, adulterers, rapists, those who committed treason, and those who practised magic could not be,[10] nor could they appeal their sentence.[11] Those guilty of treason or magic would have their goods and property confiscated by the state.[12] As recently as 389, Theodosius I had reaffirmed the prohibition on magic,[13] and a law in the name of Honorius himself in 409 had repeated the ban on astrologers.[14]

Such intolerance of magic had deep roots in Christianity's Jewish heritage (Exod 22:17; Lev 19:26 and 31; 20:6 and 27; Deut 18:10-12), even though King Saul was prepared to ignore such religious prescriptions when normal religious channels did not give him the information he sought to summon the ghost of the dead prophet Samuel (1 Sam 28:7-25) and such practices were part of the sorry tale of the people of Israel breaking God's covenant (2 Kgs 17:17).

In the first generation of Christianity Paul listed sorcery as one of the great sins of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21).[15] Simon Magus is the magician mentioned in Acts 8:9-24, whom later Christians, like Irenaeus of Lyon, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian, believed to be the source of all heresy and gnosticism.[16] After Acts Simon appears later in New Testament apocrypha, particularly those works that focus on Peter, such as the reconstituted *Actus Petri cum Simone*, where his magic is defeated by Peter's miracles.[17] This immediately raises the question of why a miracle is not considered magic.[18] Other heretics, like Marcus and Carpocrates, practised magic in order to deceive people through their prowess to believe their deviant teachings.[19] Ignatius of Antioch wrote that the power of magic was ended with the coming of Jesus,[20] yet he calls the eucharist a medicine of immortality (φάρμακον ἀθανασίας), using the same word that in Revelation 9:21 is employed in a negative sense to mean sorceries.[21] What we find in all these texts is the belief that such magical powers were real and were a threat to Christianity. As Riemer Roukema puts it, 'The Christian leaders were of the opinion that magic practices put people in contact with pagan gods or demons, so that Christians should keep aloof from it.'[22] Thus, Galla Placidia's reported abhorrence is entirely in keeping with one strain of Christianity.

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[10] *Cod. Theod.* 9.38.4 and 7-8 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 496 and 497–8).

[11] *Cod. Theod.* 11.36.1 and 7(Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 646 and 648–9).

[12] *Cod. Theod.* 9.42.2 and 4 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 509).

[13] *Cod. Theod.* 9.16.11 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 463). On Theodosius see *PLRE* 1.904–5 (Theodosius 4).

[14] *Cod. Theod.* 9.16.12 (Mommsen and Krüger, 1990, 463).

[15] For an overview of early Christianity's attitude towards magic see the 1980 chapter reproduced in Aune, 2006, 368–422; and Roukema, 2007, 367–78.

[16] Irenaeus, *Adu. haer.* 1.23 (SC 264.312–18); Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 26.2 and 56.1–4 (SC 507.198 and 278); *Dial.* 120 (Marcovich, 1997, 276–8); Tertullian, *De an.* 34.2–4 (CCL 2.835–6). See Klauck, 2003.

[17] See Bremmer, 1998; Ehrman, 2003, 135–54; and Eastman, 2015.

[18] See the insightful comments of Kahlos, 2016, 162–77.

[19] Irenaeus, *Adu.haer.* 1.13 (SC 264.188–204) and 1.25.3 (SC 264.336–8).

[20] Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 19.3 (Holmes, 1999^2, 148): ὅθεν ἐλύετο πᾶσα μαγέια καὶ πᾶς δεσμός, ἠφανίζετο κακίας ἄγνοια, καθηρεῖ το παλαιὰ βασιλεία ...

[21] Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 20.2 (Holmes, 1999^2, 150). See Roukema, 2007, 368–9.

[22] Roukema, "Early Christianity and Magic," p. 368.

Yet, we also know that many Christians practised various forms of magic, including incantations and curses.[23] John Chrysostom, for example, stated that sacred books in a home had the apotropaic effect of warding off demons and helping people not to sin.[24] All of this variation in attitude gave rise to opportunities for different groups within Christianity to accuse others of practising magic or of defending their own practices as being outside the definition of magic.[25]

Libanius was promising to enhance national security against barbarians without the shedding of Roman military blood and this is why Constantius would have been attracted to the idea and gave him permission to try, since he had spent much of his career as *magister utriusque militiae* seeking to neutralise usurpers and the barbarians who had crossed into Roman territory on New Year's Eve in 406.[26] Libanius could contribute to that goal. Although a century worth of law prohibited it, political expediency was able to ignore that obstacle. One could argue that such an apotropaic intention of safeguarding the Christian empire against non-Christian or non-orthodox enemies through some means could well or should have been welcomed by Galla Placidia for the sake of protecting the homeland. Was she being too highly principled, unpatriotic, simplistic, or somewhat opportunistic in her opposition?

We are not told by what means Libanius was going to employ his magic: through incantation or sacrifice or something else. Indeed, we are not even told if Libanius were Christian or non-Christian. Certainly, if he had been non-Christian, and we shall see later that this could well have been Olympiodorus' presumption, this would have given Galla Placidia reasonable grounds to argue that he was going to subject the safety and allegiance of the empire to demons and powers hostile to Christianity.

I would like to consider that, whatever principles justified Galla Placidia's hostility to Libanius, there was also the element of opportunism revealed by this account in furthering her opposition to being married to Constantius and in being a woman of independent agency, as well as how Olympiodorus exploited that for his own ends, which we shall consider at the end.

Galla Placidia and Constantius

What I wish to demonstrate in this section is that the idea of antipathy between Galla Placidia and Constantius is not solely a literary construct of Olympiodorus but is borne out through a careful reading of other sources, namely from the principals themselves. First, however, we shall survey the extent of the reported disagreements between the pair within Olympiodorus.

We learn from Olympiodorus that the objectives of Constantius in Gaul in the second decade of the fifth century were to deal with the usurpers, the barbarian incursion, and to regain Galla Placidia from the Goths, who had taken her from Rome when they captured the city in August 410.[27] Even though Galla Placidia had carved out a role for herself

[23] See Meyer and Smith, 1999; and Trzcionka, 2007.

[24] John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Laz.* 3.2 (PG 48.994).

[25] See Marasco, 2011, 367–421.

[26] See Dunn, 2014, 1–21; and Dunn, 2015a, 376–93.

[27] On this last objective see Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 22.1–3 (Blockley, 1983, 184–6).

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among the Goths through her marriage with Athaulf,[28] Constantius was not motivated simply by a desire to rescue her from the clutches of barbarians, but, as Olympiodorus asserted, by the desire to marry her.[29] It cannot be doubted that Constantius was aware that the husband of Galla Placidia was in a prime position with regard to succeeding the childless Honorius and as the man who had emerged eventually in top position after the fall of Stilicho he could not let anyone else claim her in marriage if he wanted to keep his pre-eminence. Although Stilicho's fall showed the pitfalls of such marital alliances with the imperial family, becoming the father of a suitable heir (something Stilicho had not achieved in his efforts to be grandfather of an heir) was a possible solution to the drawback of Stilicho's experience.[30] We also know from Olympiodorus, and from him alone, that when Constantius married Galla Placidia on 1 January 417, as he entered his second consulship, she was a most reluctant bride who had to be dragged to the ceremony by her half-brother.[31]

Galla Placidia's threat of divorce in the story of Libanius the magician shows that she seemed to be very much aware that Constantius relied upon that marriage union to undergird his claim to imperial status. Even though he had been the mastermind behind Honorius' regime for more than a decade, his elevation to Augustus rested upon his being part of the imperial family. Take that away and he would have been less secure, particularly if Galla Placidia remarried. As Lütkenhaus points out, we do not know how many other times Galla Placidia threatened her husband with divorce,[32] but I would think that it was only in the several months that Constantius was emperor in 421 that such a threat would have been most effective.

We find other examples in Olympiodorus where Galla Placidia was a formidable woman of some agency. I would contend that it served Olympiodorus' purposes not only to have antagonism between Galla Placidia and Constantius on their wedding day but throughout their married life as well. She single-handedly, through the birth of a son to her first husband, Athaulf, nearly reconciled the Goths, who had been something of a gadfly to the empire ever since Alaric had first appeared in the early 390s, with the empire. Constantius is blamed for sinking these chances in 414.[33] We are told that it was at Galla Placidia's insistence (βιασαμένης) that Valentinian, her son with Constantius, was declared *nobilissimus*.[34] Constantius is not mentioned.

One example of conflict between Galla Placidia and Constantius not mentioned by Olympiodorus, concerns the disputed Roman episcopal election of 418–419. After the death of Zosimus on 26 December 418, two rival candidates emerged: the archdeacon Eulalius and the presbyter Boniface. Information about this dispute is contained in an

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[28] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 24 (Blockley, 1983, 186–8) and 26.1 (Blockley, 1983, 188). On Athaulf see *PLRE* 2.176–8.

[29] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 26.2 (Blockley, 1983, 190) = Philostorgius, *Hist. eccl.* 12.4–5 (GCS 21^3.143–4).

[30] McEvoy, 2013, 214.

[31] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 33.1 (Blockley, 1983, 196).

[32] Lütkenhaus, 1998, 160. Yet, I do not know if I would go as far as he does on 161 in saying: 'Sie befand sich zudem wegen ihrer Verwandtschaft mit Honorius auf lange Sicht immer im Vorteil gegenüber Constantius.'

[33] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 26.1 (Blockley, 1983, 188).

[34] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 33.1 (Blockley, 1983, 196). Philostorgius, *Hist. eccl.* 12.12 (GCS 21^3.148) does not mention Galla Placidia's role in this. On Valentinian III see *PLRE* 2.1138–9 (Valentinianus 4).

extensive dossier of more than twenty letters in the *Collectio Avellana*.[35] What is clear is that, following an initial recognition of Eulalius, who had been elected first, Ravenna withdrew that recognition and insisted that local bishops resolve the conflict. I would contend that Ravenna was not interested in which candidate was successful so long as the situation was resolved peacefully, since the government's concern was with civil unrest.[36] As Christopher Kelly notes:

> Emperors' interest or willingness to arbitrate … could neither always be guaranteed nor ever entirely dismissed. Unsurprisingly, in practice the disputes which mattered most, and which always had the best chance of being heard, were those which threatened the security of a city, its financial stability, or the social and economic dominance of those upon whom central government depended for the continued collection of taxes and the maintenance of good order.[37]

Only when Eulalius broke the imposed condition of remaining outside Rome until the matter could be decided by other bishops did Ravenna endorse Boniface and end the dispute, even though it was not the intention of the government to pick the new bishop.

Within the *Collectio Avellana* are a couple of letters written by Galla Placidia, which is clear from internal evidence even though the editorial comment introducing the letters carry Honorius' name, to bishops in Africa inviting them to be part of the second episcopal synod that was going to gather to attempt to settle the disputed election until it was made redundant by Eulalius' pre-emptive move.[38] In those letters it is clear that Galla Placidia favoured one candidate over the other, even though she was not specific about whom it was that she supported. Scholarship is divided in trying to decide between the two.[39]

What is of interest is that modern biographers of Galla Placidia assert that she and her husband were of one mind in supporting one candidate over the other.[40] However, if we accept the idea that Constantius was directing imperial affairs from Ravenna in place of the disinterested, incapable, or weak-minded Honorius, as Matthews and McEvoy posit,[41]

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[35] *Collectio Avellana*, *Epp.* 14–37 (CSEL 35.59–84). On the place of this dossier within the whole *collectio* see Wirbelauer, 1993, 134–8. On Zosimus see *PCBE* 2.2381 (Zosimus 3). On Eulalius see *PCBE* 2.680–1 (Eulalius 2). On Boniface I see *PCBE* 2.318–19 (Bonifacius 3).

[36] See Dunn, 2015b, 1–13; and Dunn, 2015c, 137–57.

[37] Kelly, 2004, 129.

[38] [Galla Placidia], *Epistula ad Aurelium* (*Aliam quidem*) (*Coll. Avell. Ep.* 27 [CSEL 35.73]); and *Epistula ad Augustinum et al.* (*Peruenisse ad*) (*Coll. Avell. Ep.* 28 [CSEL 35.73–4]). Some, like Oost, 1968, 159 and 167; Sivan, 2011, 78; and Salisbury, 2015, 126, even think Galla Placidia wrote the letter to Paulinus of Nola (Honorius, *Epistula ad Paulinum* [*Iam tunc*] [*Coll. Avell. Ep.* 25 (CSEL 35.71–2)]).

[39] Chantraine, 1988, 87–8, argued that it was Boniface, while Oost, 1968, 158, thought it was Eulalius.

[40] Oost, 1968, 158; and Sivan, 2011, 79. The work of Holum, 1982, is of no use to us because, despite his work's title, he does not investigate Galla Placidia in depth.

[41] Matthews, 1998^2, 265–6. Of course, what Matthews, unlike McEvoy, fails to address, is why the adult Honorius (unlike the adolescent Honorius under Stilicho), if he was capable of directing affairs, chose not to do so. As Kelly, 2004, 190–1, also notes, 'Emperors had no option but to depend on second-hand advice or information; no choice but to count on often far-distant subordinates to carry out their commands. Delegation was an inescapable corollary of imperial rule.' Of course, this general statement does not address the individual case of Honorius' capacity as emperor nor rule out an emperor taking a particular interest in

and which is supported by the letter Constantius issued in his own name to Symmachus, the urban prefect, accompanying a letter ostensibly from Honorius,[42] then the policy of imperial neutrality must have been Constantius', and Galla Placidia's preparedness to mention to the Africans her support of one candidate over the other, even without revealing who that was, shows her taking an independent course from her husband.

Even if we credit Honorius with more capacity and interest in running the empire than we get in Procopius' account of the emperor's disengagement in political reality when Rome was captured by Alaric back in 410 (and there is every reason to take Procopius' account with an artery-hardening amount of salt),[43] without going as far as Orosius who stated that Honorius ruled with Constantius' help,[44] and if we adopt the position of seeing Honorius having some say in the policy directions of the empire, the letter from Constantius (*Epistula* 30 in the *Collectio Avellana*) still shows that he and Honorius were of one mind about imperial non-preference in the outcome of the electoral dispute (regardless of whose mind it was that first had adopted such a position), unlike Galla Placidia. The point is not Honorius' agency but Galla Placidia's dissent.

While one can agree with Barnwell, that the *magister militum* as army commander had a ready power base from which to influence civil administration if he so choose, one should not necessarily see this as an 'abuse of power' as he does, singling out Constantius' role in the election/appointment of Patroclus as bishop of Arles in 412 as one example.[45] Indeed, Constantius himself is the evidence that contradicts Barnwell when he writes, 'the masters of the soldiers … did not … try to dispense with the position of the emperor, nor did they ever try to become emperors themselves.'[46] Despite this quibble, one can agree with his overall statement:

> All royal courts are subject to factionalism, and officials who can command the loyalty of armed forces are in a strong position to engage in it. There was, in addition, nothing new in factionalism in the imperial court in the fifth century, and the fact that as late as its third quarter courtiers were still prepared to participate in court intrigues shows that the emperor and the Empire were still seen to be worth influencing. The people chosen as emperors may have been weak, but the position of emperor was not, at least until a succession of puppets had brought it into disrepute: by over-influencing the people they made emperors, courtiers of the mid-fifth

a particular matter. The argument is: however the relationship between Constantius and Honorius worked, they were of one mind about how to handle to Roman episcopal election dispute.

[42] Constantius, *Epistula ad Symmachum* (*Vt certa*) (*Coll. Avell. Ep.* 30 [CSEL 35.76]); and Honorius, *Epistula ad Symmachum* (*Cum ad sanandum*) (*Coll. Avell. Ep.* 31 [CSEL 35.76]). Barnwell, 1992, 37, is mistaken in identifying Galla Placidia as sister (instead of mother) of Valentinian III when discussing this rescript from Constantius.

[43] Procopius, *B.Vand.* 1.2.25–6. On Alaric see *PLRE* 2.43–8 (Alaricus 1).

[44] Orosius, *Hist. adu. pag.* 7.42.16 (CSEL 5.558). On Orosius see *PLRE* 2.813.

[45] See Dunn, 2014, 7, where it is argued that whatever Constantius did for Patroclus was at the latter's initiative not the former's. To call the application of influence from a powerful person in episcopal elections 'abuse' is unwarranted in a world that did not have clear notions of the separation of church and state. See Barnwell, 1992, 42. On Patroclus see Duchesne, 1907–1915^2, 1.95–112 and 256; Griffe, 1966^2, 146–52; Heinzelmann, 1976, 71–2; Limmer, 2004, 91–2; and *PCBE* 4.1437–40 (Patroclus 2).

[46] Barnwell, 1992, 43.

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century destroyed the power of the very man they thought they needed in order to further their own interests.[47]

While I wish to argue that Honorius was a weak emperor dominated by Constantius, my argument does not rest on this point. Whatever the case, the evidence in the *Collectio Avellana* on the Roman episcopal election dispute of 418/419, shows Honorius and Constantius of one mind in not having a preference between the rival episcopal candidates, and Galla Placidia of another, opposed to both husband and half-brother.

The fact that we have evidence in primary source material untouched by Olympiodorus (the dossier in the *Collectio Avellana*) that indicates some kind of divergence between Constantius and Galla Placidia, means that we cannot dismiss the material in Olympiodorus about antagonism between this couple as purely that author's inventive fantasy. Nonetheless, it suited Olympiodorus' literary objective to exploit such a situation for the purposes of his writing.

Olympiodorus' Aim Revealed in His Portrayal of Galla Placidia and Constantius

In addition to what this story concerning Libanius tells us about the relationship between Constantius and Galla Placidia, it tells us even more about Olympiodorus as author. Many commentators, however, have not examined this aspect of the story. John Matthews reports the affair of Libanius the magician as a rumour of tension in the marriage, although he does seem to accept the truthfulness of Constantius resenting his wife.[48] He also notes that this story is one example of Olympiodorus having access to court gossip.[49] Stewart Oost, Hagith Sivan, Joyce Salisbury, and Thomas Lawrence also simply see this as evidence of Galla Placidia's piety and hostility towards her husband.[50] Lütkenhaus is interested in explaining why the church would not have been so critical of Galla Placidia in wanting to divorce a man who was supporting pagan magicians.[51] None of them asks questions beyond that about how this incident contributes to the literary agenda of the person who provided us with the information. It is to this issue that we turn attention now.

Of course, the difficulty in attempting to analyse Olympiodorus is that what we possess of his original work is not even fragmentary but an epitome made from notes produced in the ninth century by Photius, patriarch of Constantinople.[52] This is evident from the first word of the passage quoted at the start of this paper providing the story about Libanius. The 'he' mentioned is Olympiodorus as author; we are reading Photius' summary of Olympiodorus' work. Even Zosimus, Sozomen, and Philostorgius, who make extensive use of Olympiodorus, were not quoting him explicitly but making use of his material. It is Photius' assessment that the story is teratological. What we have to be aware

[47] Barnwell, 1992, 43.

[48] Matthews, 1998^2, 377.

[49] Matthews, 1970, 95.

[50] Oost, 1968, 144; Sivan, 2011, 82–5; Salisbury, 2015, 130–1; and Lawrence, 2013, 216.

[51] Lütkenhaus, 1998, 160: 'In dem konkreten Zusammenhang, in dem sie Constantius mit der Scheidung drohte, wäre sie möglicherweise nicht auf eine Kritik der Kirche gestoßen, zwang sie ihn doch so, sich von den heidnischen Praktiken eines Zauberes zu distanzieren, der seine Hilfe bei der Bekämpfung von Barbaren angeboten hatte.'

[52] See Thompson, 1944, 43–52; and Treadgold, 1980.

of is the ways in which these later writers might have reinterpreted what they read in Olympiodorus when we try to understand Olympiodorus. Indeed, according to Warren Treadgold, Photius disliked Olympiodorus.[53]

In Olympiodorus, we find evidence blackening the reputation of Constantius. At the start of Constantius' first consulship in 414, Olympiodorus comments on Constantius' sullen and unattractive appearance,[54] which Blockley rights reads as reflecting hostility.[55] Matthews has said that Olympiodorus' portrayal of Constantius is 'suitably ambivalent'.[56] Even in confiscating the property of his enemies like Heraclian to fund his consulship, Constantius was not effective in getting enough. Further, Olympiodorus, who wants to show the need for a hero like Theodosius II to rescue the western empire, can use the estate of Heraclian to demonstrate both the greed of Constantius and the impotency of Honorius in a single sentence: 'All of this estate Constantius received from Honorius in response to a single request.'[57] With Constantius' death, Olympiodorus wanted his readers to believe that western hostility to the eastern empire ceased.[58]

What are we to make of Olympiodorus' seemingly positive statement about Constantius: 'In addition to his other virtues he was free from greed until he married Placidia.'?[59] On the surface this seems to be a negative assessment of Galla Placidia: she corrupted him, and this is how the passage often is read.[60] Yet, the very next sentence shows that Olympiodorus was in fact targeting Constantius.[61] It is as though the historian is trying to show why Constantius ought not to have married Galla Placidia in the first place; his lust for money was because he was too poor to keep his wife in the style her imperial dignity demanded. Constantius is not to be seen as hen-pecked but as not up for the role. The unsuitability of Constantius to rule as emperor justifies why Theodosius refused to recognise him.[62]

What of Galla Placidia? At the start of this paper it was noted that Blockley identified Olympiodorus' support and interest in magic. It has been argued here, in contrast with some other assessments, that overall Olympiodorus has a positive assessment of Galla Placidia.[63] Yet, it was Galla Placidia who was responsible for Libanius being killed. Is there not a contradiction here? There would be if Olympiodorus presented only one-dimensional characters. Blockley has noted this and offered something of an explanation:

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[53] Treadgold, 2004, 709.

[54] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 23 (Blockley, 1983, 186).

[55] Blockley, 1981, 42.

[56] Matthews, 1970, 91.

[57] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 23 (Blockley, 1983, 186): καὶ ταύτην ἅπασαν τὴν ὑπόστασιν Κωνστάντιος ἐκ μιᾶς αἰτήσεως παρὰ Ὀνωρίον εἰλήφει.

[58] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 33.1 (Blockley, 1983, 196).

[59] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 37 (Blockley, 1983, 200): ἦν δὲ τἆλλα μὲν ἐπαινετός, καὶ χρημάτων δὲ κρείττων πρὶν ἢ συναφθῆναι Πλακιδίᾳ.

[60] This is how it is understood by Baldwin, 1980, 223–4; and Sivan, 2011, 85.

[61] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 37 (Blockley, 1983, 200): μετὰ μέντοι τὸν αὐτοῦ θάνατον δεήσεις κατ' αὐτοῦ τῶν εἰς χρήματα ἀδικήθεντων ἐπὶ Ῥάβενναν πανταχόθεν συνέρρεον. For good measure, to show the hopelessness of the situation in the western empire, Olympiodorus then mentions Honorius' unresponsiveness to these complaints.

[62] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 33.2 (Blockley, 1983, 198) = Philostorgius, *Hist. eccl.* 12.12 (GCS 21^3.148).

[63] See Matthews, 1970, 92.

> Towards Placidia personally Olympiodorus appears to have been cool … Yet he saw in her the best hope for the realisation of Stilicho's policy of an accommodation between the Roman and the Visigoths, through the philo-Roman view of Ataulf which had developed before and during his marriage to Placidia and which were formed partly at least under her influence.[64]

This is true but does not go far enough. As Matthews points out, Olympiodorus' work was dedicated to Theodosius II, as the 'author of the western revival and eastern ascendancy with which it culminated.'[65] Thus, the work does more than show the importance of co-operation between the eastern and western halves of the empire,[66] or trace the fall and then rise again of Rome;[67] as others have observed. What it is really trying to do is to praise Theodosius II and the East as the great hope for the future of Roman rule throughout the entire empire, which may all have been tied up with a possible visit by Olympiodorus to Rome in association with the events surrounding the defeat of the usurper John and the installation of Valentinian III.[68] Even if not an encomium but an official report designed by Olympiodorus for Theodosius and the court in Constantinople to read,[69] such a perspective on history as leading to this definitive and glorious moment for the eastern empire is entirely understandable. Indeed, I would go further than Treadgold in thinking that Olympiodorus was recommending the East help the western empire,[70] to suggest that his work was indeed a document of congratulations on the success of such a policy having been implemented already.

For Olympiodorus, Galla Placidia was an agent in this story of the triumph of the East. Her exile in the East provided the impetus for the solution to dealing with the usurper John in Ravenna. Yet, even though she was important to this story at the culmination of the work (and I reject the notion that Olympiodorus was averse to Galla Placidia), she is not its heroine. The initial setback in the retaking of the West, with the capture of Ardabur, leaves Galla Placidia in despair.[71] Only an easterner will be responsible for ultimate triumph.

Olympiodorus was capable of subsuming his personal, probably non-Christian views (where, in other circumstances he would have been critical of Galla Placidia's opposition to Libanius), to his overall objective of lauding Theodosius II. The emperor was an extremely pious and orthodox Christian, as Fergus Millar has so eloquently highlighted.[72] One can agree with Baldwin that Olympiodorus, as am ambitious diplomat, was neutral, even subtle and careful, rather than militant about promoting his non-Christian opinions.[73] Whether or not Olympiodorus felt any sympathy for Libanius, he had to please his reader

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[64] Blockley, 1981, 45.
[65] Matthews, 1998^2, 386. See also Baldwin, 1980, 216–17.
[66] Gillett, 1992, 1–29.
[67] Rohrbacher, 2002, 77.
[68] See Treadgold, 2004, 724. On John see *PLRE* 2.594–5 (Ioannes 6).
[69] Treadgold, 2004, 731.
[70] Treadgold, 2004, 733.
[71] Olympiodorus, *Frag.* 43.1 (Blockley, 1983, 206).
[72] Millar, 2006, especially 116–57.
[73] Baldwin, 1980," 220.

(Theodosius) and keep such personal opinions within an acceptable limit.[74] To this extent, there are obvious parallels between what Claudian had done Stilicho[75] and Olympiodorus for Theodosius II.[76]

To that end, Constantius and, to a lesser extent, Honorius had to be part of the problem of why the West was in such difficulty and, since she was part of and the excuse for the rescue mission, Galla Placidia had to stand in stark contrast to her second husband. Constantius was dead and could be castigated mercilessly. For Olympiodorus, the story of Libanius the magician achieved this. While there is some criticism of Honorius in Olympiodorus it is muted, and this reflects the attitude of the court at Constantinople. Honorius was harmless and could be left in peace, while Constantius had been the real potential threat.

Given that Constantius was supported by Honorius—indeed, as Meaghan McEvoy argues, Honorius seemed content to allow his court to be ruled by a strong man (Stilicho, Olympius, Jovius, Eusebius, Allobich, and Constantius) either because he was incapable of ruling himself, uninterested, or realised that this was the best way to promote a long reign[77]—, Olympiodorus might well have been constrained in how openly he described ongoing resistance by Galla Placidia to some policies of the imperial government in Ravenna. So, it is present but not stressed; able to be detected by the astute reader but with plausible deniability.[78] What we see is that she opposed policies of her husband (and her half-brother, but only in the subtlest ways) with which her nephew in Constantinople, Theodosius II, would also have been opposed. Indeed, the whole aim of the eastern empire was to remove the usurper John and restore the family of Theodosius I (i.e. Honorius' family). While one could present Valentinian's father negatively, there was a limit on how negatively Honorius could be portrayed and still have the East advocate a restoration of his family to the throne.

On this reading, the position reached here is that, far from being a story critical of Galla Placidia, the story of Libanius is one in which Olympiodorus could highlight her total alignment with a century's worth of anti-magic imperial legislation and with Theodosius II's own piety.

Conclusion

The small and otherwise forgettable story of the execution of Libanius the magician in 421 at the court of Ravenna preserved in Photius' ninth-century notes on Olympiodorus' contemporary account of events in the western empire that culminated in the installation of Valentinian III as emperor in 425, is actually an important one. It tells us something about Christian tolerance and intolerance of non-Christian religious practices in late antiquity, particularly magic. Not only that, it also tells us about the stormy relationship

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[74] Matthews, 1970, 96.

[75] See Cameron, 1970.

[76] This develops the suggestive link first offered in his 1965 article, reproduced and updated in Cameron, 2016, 25–6.

[77] McEvoy, 2013, 187–8. On Olympius see *PLRE* 2.801–2 (Olympius 1). On Jovius see *PLRE* 2.623–4 (Iovius 3). On Eusebius see *PLRE* 2.429 (Eusebius 9). On Allobich see *PLRE* 2.61.

[78] Of course, given the state in which we have Olympiodorus, we cannot make too much of this suggestion.

between Galla Placidia and her husband Constantius III. Even more and most importantly, it reveals how that difficult and contentious marriage (confirmed by independent evidence in the *Collectio Avellana*) was used by Olympiodorus to construct his account of recent events in the West to show that, by sending Galla Placidia and her son Valentinian back to the West to re-establish the family in power against the usurper John, Theodosius II proved himself the great saviour of the whole empire, overcoming the problems that the western emperors themselves, like Constantius III and even Theodosius' uncle, Honorius, had failed to resolve. Mirroring Constantinople's own perspective, Honorius is both the last legitimate emperor whose family must be avenged by the installation of Valentinian and, at the same time, the hapless victim of Constantius' machinations. If this reading is correct then we must reverse the statements of those modern authors who see Olympiodorus as exhibiting any real sympathy for Constantius in light of his difficult marriage.

Whatever Olympiodorus' own personal position on magic, he presented the story of Libanius in such a way that it could be read by the eastern emperor as praise for Galla Placidia, not criticism, and condemnation of Constantius, not sympathy, for the different ways in which they reacted to imperial legislation and the piety of Theodosius II. For Olympiodorus, all the recent events in the West were but fodder in his argument that the West had become morally and politically bankrupt until the intervention of Theodosius II. In Olympiodorus, Galla Placidia was an agent in Theodosius' success in the West, a woman whose guidance of her young son would not lead to the regrettable domination that Constantius had exercised over Honorius.

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